

Lecturing Creatively

As the twenty-first century dawned, prognosticators in higher education predicted confidently that the digital era would see a massive diminution of face-to-face teaching. It was assumed that something as mundane as lecturing would be consigned to the graveyard of pedagogic history and replaced by online teaching formats geared to student convenience. The Internet was expected to be the final nail in the coffin of uninterrupted, mind-numbing teacher-talk delivered in a sleep-inducing monotone. Yet, for having been declared dead, the corpse of lecture-based teaching shows remarkable signs of life. Those who periodically read the last rites on the method usually find themselves resuscitating it, much to their surprise.

Lecturing can certainly be done abominably. But just because something is done badly by some teachers in some classrooms does not mean the method as a whole is inherently flawed. To think that all lecturing is bad and that all attempts at discussion-based learning are good is to exercise a myopic dualism as simplistic as the "Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad" mantra in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Lecturing can certainly be abused and discussion can certainly be engaging and enlightening, but in and of themselves neither are innately good nor bad ways to teach. One of the traps that advocates of discussion methods often fall into is that of setting up a false dichotomy between lecturing and discussion. They give the impression that anyone who

lectures combines the moral sensitivity of Caligula with the democratic impulses of Joseph Stalin. If you lecture, so their argument goes, you only serve to confirm your authoritarian, demagogic tendencies. This is a disservice to well-intentioned colleagues and a gross misunderstanding of pedagogic dynamics. Exhorting colleagues to stop lecturing altogether and only use discussion methods forces teachers to make a choice between two apparently mutually exclusive options.

This simplistic pedagogic bifurcation is wrong. Lectures are not by definition oppressive and authoritarian. And lecturers are not, by definition, demagogues. Similarly, discussions are not, by definition, liberating and spontaneous. And discussion leaders are not, by definition, democratic. You have probably been a participant in discussions where the leader manipulated the group to reach certain predefined conclusions, what Paterson (1970) described as counterfeit discussions. Through their power to control the flow of talk, to summarize and reframe students' comments, and to respond favorably to some contributions and unfavorably to others, discussion leaders can act in extremely authoritarian ways. To borrow a term from Foucault (1980), discussion leaders act as judges of normality. So instead of reducing questions of pedagogic method to a simplistic dichotomy—discussion good, lecture bad—these two methods should be seen as symbiotic.

The critique of lecturing as inducing passivity and turning students into objects is often associated with Paulo Freire. In his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), Freire explored the concept of "banking education" in which lecturers assumed learners' minds were like empty vaults waiting for knowledge to be deposited in them. His view was that banking education cast students as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active constructors of learning. However, it is often forgotten that Freire later clarified his position to observe "We have to recognize that not all kinds of lecturing is banking education. You can still be very critical lecturing. . . . The question is not banking lectures or no lectures, because traditional teachers will make reality opaque whether they lecture or lead discussions. A liberating

teacher will illuminate reality even if he or she lectures. The question is the content and dynamism of the lecture, the approach to the object to be known. Does it critically re-orient students to society? Does it animate their critical thinking or not?" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 40). So, as Freire reminds us, an abused method calls into question the expertise of those abusing it, not the validity of the method itself. The challenge is to make our lectures as helpful, enlivening, and critically stimulating as possible.

We should also remember that the lecture is not a unitary method. In fact its only unifying characteristic is that it involves sustained periods of teacher talk. Such talk can, however, be conducted in a variety of forms. At times it is highly sequential, an intellectual road map that guides students past the trail markers along the way to an eventual destination. It can also take quite the opposite form, beginning with the expression of a position or explanation of a concept and then tracing its intellectual adherents in terms of previous understandings or evidence. At other times it resembles an extemporaneous improvisation in which teachers explore associations that occur to them as they speak or that are prompted by their response to student questions. Occasionally it is deliberately theatrical, a way of piquing interest. It can also take the form of a spiraling critical debate, with the lecturer presenting one position supported by convincing evidence, then vigorously articulating the opposite view supported by equally persuasive data, then responding to that opposite position, then critiquing that view, and so on. It also frequently begins with the lecturer posing a problem of the day and then exploring different ways of responding to this.

Be Clear About Why We Lecture

When we use any teaching approach, we need to be clear exactly what it's intended to achieve. This clarity should not be apparent just to us, it should also be apparent to students. As Farrah (2004) points out, lectures are a good way to create windows into the

instructor's mind, something Chapter Four described as central to building both teacher credibility and authenticity. So a lecture should begin with a statement to students as to why it is being used and what it is intended to accomplish. Its relevance to course goals, its connection to some part of the syllabus, and its relevance to earlier lectures, discussions, or assignments can all be clarified for students at the outset of the session.

In his classic review of research into lecturing, Bligh (2000) argues that its primary function is to introduce information to learners, not to prompt or develop skills of critical analysis, synthesis, or integration. In fact, as an advocate of lecturing Bligh argues that it should be used relatively sparingly and that "it behooves lecturers to lecture less . . . and create opportunities, in lessons and outside, in which thinking can flourish" (p. 182). He also cites research, supported by others such as Race (2000, 2001) and Brown and Race (2002) that no lecture should entail more than twenty-minute blocks of uninterrupted teacher talk.

So why should we consider using lectures as an element of our teaching? Some of the most frequently proposed reasons are as follows:

To establish the broad outline of a body of material. Here the lecture is positioned at the outset of a course, or module within a course, to survey the intellectual terrain that students will be traversing in the next few weeks or months. This kind of lecture presents students with contrasting schools of thought, groups a confusing variety of positions into general interpretive categories, and makes the case for focusing on some of these over others. Such a lecture is particularly important if students are being asked to make choices about future independent study projects. It functions as a sort of intellectual relief map outlining the territory and topography waiting to be traversed in the weeks ahead.

To explain, with frequent examples, concepts that are hard for learners to understand. This can be done prior to students' own struggles with such concepts or after their initial engagement with them through individual study.

To introduce alternative perspectives and interpretations. This kind of lecture can review the different positions in a debate prior to a more detailed analysis of these or to advance a view that is critical of material that has been studied previously.

To model intellectual attitudes and behaviors you wish to encourage in students. Here the lecture is used to model critical thinking through the lecturer regularly critiquing her own position, playing devil's advocate against her previously articulated comments, or demonstrating to students how she deconstructs the prevailing groupthink in an area of study. If you want students to be critical of their own ideas, to be ready to cite the evidence that supports their arguments, and to be open to exploring alternative perspectives that are inconvenient to their positions, then you must be ready to model these actions in your lectures and to explain to students that this is what you're doing. Also, by publicly grappling with complex ideas and talking of your difficulties understanding these, you can show learners that encountering problems in the struggle for understanding is neither a sign of failure nor source of shame.

To encourage learners' interest in a topic. A lecture can be an inspiring, galvanizing event that conveys your personal animation and passion for a topic. As Bligh (2000) writes, in a lecture "there's only one thing more contagious than enthusiasm, and that's the lack of it" (p. 59). The lecture can also be used to demonstrate to learners the relevance of an area of study by connecting the new knowledge to students' current or previous experiences or by showing its centrality to the chief purposes of a class. The lecturer can also use the lecture to make clear her own conviction that the topic is so important that she wishes students to understand it thoroughly—a crucial indicator of credibility as demonstrated in Chapter Four.

Characteristics of Helpful Lectures

To understand how lectures can be helpful to students' learning, we need to consult those students and find out from their point of view

the features that are most conducive to learning. Research on this topic (Bligh, 2000; Race, 2000, 2001; Brown and Race, 2002; Farrah, 2004) indicates that students believe helpful lectures exhibit the following characteristics:

- They use a variety of teaching and communication processes.
- They are clearly organized so students can follow the thread of the lecturer's thought.
- The lecturer clearly models learning behaviors expected in the course.

Using a Mix of Teaching and Communication Approaches

Given that students clearly have different learning styles, varying communication styles and modalities in a lecture has long been argued as an essential component of good practice. In any lecture I would advocate that at least three different approaches or modalities be used. Any more than this and the lecture is experienced as too fractured, any less and interest declines. Some simple ways to introduce variety are to use plenty of visual aids (such as overhead graphics, PowerPoint mini-presentations, cartoons, and brief film clips), to introduce occasional guest speakers, to play audio extracts from tapes, radio, or web broadcasts or other lectures, to use Internet video-streaming clips, and to provide frequent pauses for student responses and questions. Four particularly useful options are discussed below.

Deliberately Introduce Periods of Silence

One barrier to learning in lectures is teachers' belief that learning results from continuous teacher talk. For more reflective or introverted learners, or for those who process new information best by having plenty of time to mull it over and connect it to their existing

experience and stock of knowledge, periods of reflective silence are crucial. For such learners too much teacher talk mystifies and confuses rather than clarifies. Teachers need to learn the very hard lesson that silence does not represent a vacuum in learning or indicate complete disengagement. It signifies a different but often a significant and intense engagement with the topic of the lecture. Many students prefer a "chunked" approach that divides the lecture into a series of ten- to fifteen-minute blocks with a brief silent interlude following each expository "chunk."

There are various ways we can introduce helpful silence into our lectures. We can tell students they need a minute to think about how to answer a question we have just asked them, and then we take that full minute before asking for responses from the floor. After every twenty minutes or so of uninterrupted lecture, we can call for two or three minutes of silent reflective speculation. During this time students are asked to think about the preceding twenty minutes and write down the most important point they felt was made, or the most puzzling assertion that was expressed, or the question they most would like to ask. At the end of these few minutes of silent reflection, students can either spend a couple of minutes sharing their ideas in pairs or triads, or they can volunteer to speak these to the whole class, or they can write them down and pass them to the lecturer and have her read out a random selection. The next section of the lecture would then have these responses incorporated into its content.

Introduce Buzz Groups into Lectures

The pairs or triads mentioned above are often referred to as buzz groups—small groups that buzz with purposeful conversation at various times during a lecture. Buzz groups can be used at different points in a lecture. At the outset they can generate questions students hope will be answered in the lecture, perhaps based on assigned prereading. At the end they can be used as the vehicle for

sharing individual responses to the Muddiest Point exercise discussed in Chapter Three. Buzz groups interspersed throughout the lecture usually ask students to make some judgments regarding the relative merits, relevance, or usefulness of the constituent elements of the lecture. Examples of such questions are:

- What's the most contentious statement you've heard so far in the lecture today?
- What's the most unsupported assertion you've heard in the lecture so far?
- What assumptions do you see as underlying the arguments made so far?

Other buzz groups can focus on deepening students' understanding by asking group members to propose some examples that illustrate a particular concept that has been addressed in the previous twenty minutes of lecture. Sometimes I deliberately insert an assertion into my lecture chunk that I know to be empirically wrong, ethically dubious, or contradictory to the rest of the lecture, and then I ask students to discuss in buzz groups what the deliberate error in that chunk might be.

In buzz groups students usually take turns giving a brief response to the question asked or task demanded and then note if one response draws particular agreement or produces significant conflict. When the two- to three-minute buzz group period is up, the lecturer asks for random responses to the questions asked or task set. She then faces the challenge of integrating these responses into the body of her comments that comprise the next chunk of the lecture.

Lecture from Siberia

In his book *When Students Have Power* (1996), Ira Shor describes the Siberia zone that exists in every college classroom. This is the

part of the classroom furthest away from the teacher's body, usually the last row of the auditorium or the seat in class by the door at the back of the room. If the teacher's body or desk represents Moscow, the center of Party authority, then the seat by the door represents Siberia, the territorial area furthest from central authority. Unlike the case of the old Soviet Union, however, students are not exiled to Siberia as punishment for their thought crimes. Instead they choose to locate themselves there so as to be as far away from teacher surveillance as possible. Their assumption is that it will be harder for them to be noticed, or called on, if they exile themselves to this zone. The student micro-sleeps that Bligh (2000) describes as occurring regularly in every lecture are taken much more easily in Siberia.

Shor describes how he deals with Siberia by moving there and speaking from that zone. Doing this is a dramatic, powerful gesture, one that breaks with the thousands of hours students have experienced listening to, or ignoring, the teacher standing or sitting at the front of the room by the chalkboard. Energy, and often panic, immediately rise when the lecturer works from Siberia, and micro-sleeps are much harder to take. Moving your position around the room can be a very effective way of engaging student attention.

Break Lectures into Ten- to Fifteen-Minute "Chunks"

In his meta-analysis of attention spans in lectures, Bligh (2000) proposes approximately twelve minutes as the optimum period of time in which students can be expected to focus on one idea or subtheme. In terms of planning our time, then, it might be useful to think about ways of "chunking" lectures into a series of fifteen-minute expositions interspersed with a number of linking or bridging activities. Some of these linking interludes might be buzz groups, periods for audience questions, reflective silences, the use of a visual illustration, the lecturer moving to another part of the room to make a new point, and so on. Here's a plan for such a sixty-minute lecture.

Minutes 1–5: Audience Research. Give a pop quiz that asks students to choose the correct answer to a factual or interpretive problem you pose based on the lecture's theme or some assigned prereading, and then give the real answers; or talk about the way an element of last week's Critical Incident Questionnaire responses connects to the theme of today's lecture.

Minutes 5–20: First Formal Presentation. Explore the lecture's major theme with one or two illustrative examples.

Minutes 20–25: Audience Questions. This can be preceded by one or two minutes of silent student reflection.

Minutes 25–40: Second Formal Presentation. Explore the second major theme.

Minutes 40–45: Buzz Groups. Students discuss the most important or muddiest point covered so far or the assumptions underlying the first two major themes.

Minutes 45–50: Respond to Buzz Groups' Comments.

Minutes 50–55: Recap of Major Points. This is followed by the lecturer's raising questions about her lecture, pointing out omissions, and acknowledging unaddressed ethical dilemmas.

Minutes 55–60: CIQ.

Organizing Lectures So Students Can Follow the Lecturer's Train of Thought

One of the most frequently mentioned features of good lectures is the clarity of their organization. There is nothing students hate more than sitting in a lecture feeling like they have lost the plot, that they are being swamped by masses of meaningless material in which they can discern no pattern. Two ways to deal with this difficulty are to provide handouts that supply the scaffolding for the lecture and to provide plenty of verbal signals when new points, changes in direction, or important caveats are being made.

Scaffolding Notes

Scaffolding notes are skeletal notes that summarize the contours of a lecture for students. They are provided beforehand either electronically or in paper form and give enough information so that students can follow the lecture's progress but not so much as to make actually showing up a duplication of effort. Often the notes are a summary of the main headings and subheadings of a lecture with space provided for students to write in their own examples, illustrations, and questions. Below is an example of scaffolding notes for a lecture on critical thinking.

Exhibit 1. Scaffolding Notes for a Lecture on Critical Thinking

SECTION A: Understanding Critical Thinking

How Do People Define Critical Thinking?

The process of identifying and checking the assumptions underlying our ideas, beliefs, and actions, and those of others.

Example:

What Are Assumptions?

Paradigmatic (structuring, taken for granted)

Example:

Prescriptive (assumptions about what ought to be)

Example:

Causal (assumptions about cause and effect)

Example:

Why Is Critical Thinking Important?

For our intellectual development

To make sure our actions are informed

To hold authority accountable—"speaking truth to power"

To create democracy

(continued)

Exhibit 1. Scaffolding Notes for a Lecture on Critical Thinking (continued)

SECTION B: Traditions of Criticality

What Intellectual Traditions Inform Criticality?

- a. Critical Theory—being critical is challenging dominant ideology that helps maintain an iniquitous, unjust system
- b. Psychoanalysis—being critical is understanding how adult development is stifled by inhibitions learned in childhood
- c. Analytic Philosophy—being critical is knowing when arguments are well structured and recognizing logical fallacies
- d. Pragmatism—being critical is constantly reexamining assumptions in light of new experience and being ready to experiment continually with new ways of creating beautiful social forms

In what ways do these traditions contradict each other?

SECTION C: How Is Critical Thinking Experienced?

Incremental Fluctuation—two steps forward, one step back

Example:

Context-Specific—can be critical in one domain and uncritical in another

Example:

Unsettling—ambiguous and continuous

Example:

SECTION D: Questions About Critical Thinking

1. Ethical dimensions—should we push this on people who resist it?
 2. Eurocentric—a European intellectual construct?
 3. Freeze—does it lead to a relativistic freeze on action?
 4. Language—alienating, confusing, obfuscating?
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Give Clear Verbal Signals

The kinds of signals I am talking about here are indications that an important point is being made or that a major change of direction is now being initiated. Bligh (2000) distinguishes between global signals (those that inform students a new section or change of direction is now being broached), key point signals (those that emphasize that one

of the main points of the lecture is now being made), and local signals (those that refer to subpoints or more detailed elaborations of key points). Other signals are aside signals (those that alert students that you are branching off into a point that you find intriguing but that is not central to the main themes being covered), example signals (that tell students you are going to illustrate an idea with one or two specific examples), and meta-review signals (a form of global signal that quickly summarizes where we are in our plan for the day's lecture).

Model Learning Behaviors

One of the mantras of skillful teaching is that teachers must model publicly their own commitment to, and engagement in, the learning activities they are seeking to encourage in their students. Lectures can be used transparently and intentionally to draw students' attention to the kinds of behaviors you are expecting of them in subsequent discussions, team presentations, and homework assignments. It is important to remember, though, that you must regularly explain to learners when you are seeking to model the behaviors you regard as important. This means interjecting phrases such as "Now I'm going to try to lay bare the assumptions my position is based on," "Now I'm going to discuss the piece of evidence I find the most convincing for this point of view," "Now I want to look at this issue from a completely different viewpoint that calls into question a lot of what I've been saying up to now," and so on. We can't expect learners to see into our minds unless we open up a window for them by telling them what we're doing. Four opportunities to model desired learning behaviors are given below.

Begin Every Lecture with a Question or Questions That You're Trying to Answer

This allows you to position the lecture as an example of active intellectual inquiry as much as a passive transfer of information. Posing two or three central questions that the lecture will address at the outset of your talk means you frame your comments as part of your continuous effort to make sense of a subject. This tells students that

you see education as a never-ending process of inquiry in which you're constantly trying to come to a point of greater understanding, all the while acknowledging that whatever truths you claim are provisional and temporary. Moreover, if students are used to seeing you open all your lectures by raising a series of framing questions, they'll be very open to this tactic when you begin discussions by posing a question or questions to be explored.

End Every Lecture with a Series of Questions That Your Lecture Has Raised or Left Unanswered

Lecturers are often told that the golden rule of effective lecturing is to "tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what you've just told 'em." The problem with this rule is that it commodifies knowledge as a neatly bounded package of facts or concepts. Doing this is inimical to intellectual inquiry, particularly to the student's ability to make connections across subject areas and disciplines. Even more worryingly, ending with a summary of what's already been said establishes a sense of definitive closure, of the last word having been spoken on the subject.

I argue that good lecturers end their presentations not only by recapping the territory that has been crossed but also by pointing out all the new routes that have been opened by the content of the lecture, and also by pointing out which of the questions posed at the start of the lecture have been left unanswered or been reframed in a more provocative or contentious way. This prepares students for the same practice in discussion where conversation sessions can be ended by asking students to volunteer the questions the discussion has raised for them (rather than by giving a summary of "what we've learned today in our discussion"). If possible, lecturers should spend the last ten minutes of a lecture asking students to write down the questions the lecture has raised for them, and then find a way to make some of these public. Students can be asked to speak their questions to the whole class, they can be asked to share them with each other in small buzz groups of two or three, or they can write

them down, pass them to the lecturer, and have the lecturer read out a random selection.

But even if none of these things are possible, your own behavior of finishing a lecture with a list of new questions the lecture raises for you, or ending with an acknowledgment of the omissions, ethical dilemmas, and contradictions that challenge what you've just articulated, is a powerful piece of modeling. You should be warned, though, that initially students will probably be very critical of this behavior. On CIQs they will record their frustration that the lecture didn't end with a clear recap of the main points. They will see your behavior of ending with questions or raising problems as unnecessarily confusing, as pulling the rug out from under their feet. Over time, as you consistently explain how doing these things is your best attempt to model the spirit of critical inquiry you are trying to encourage in learners, students' frustration will often diminish (though it will never disappear).

Deliberately Introduce Alternative Perspectives

Lectures can be used to model a willingness to consider different viewpoints or explore alternative perspectives seriously and nondefensively. One way to do this is to present as part of your lecture any arguments that counter our own assertions. A dramatic and theatrical approach is to state your opening position while you stand in one part of the room, and then to move to another part of the room, look back at where you were standing, and then direct a second set of comments back at that spot. This second set of comments should be the articulation of a different perspective on what you've just said that places an alternative interpretation on it or opens up questions about it. You say things like "However, if we look at this idea from another point of view we see that . . ." or "A whole other interpretation of this argument is possible that calls many of its central assumptions into question." You can also use this as an opportunity to model critical analysis by presenting counterarguments or rebuttals. When you do this you address your imaginary other self by name and say things

like "Stephen, what you're omitting to mention is . . ." or "Of course Stephen, you could pursue a very different line of reasoning if you argue that . . ."

Another approach is to bring a colleague (or colleagues) into your lecture who disagrees with your presentation and give them some air time to speak their views. By listening respectfully and then following their presentations with a brief period of discussion in which you acknowledge and explore your differences, you model the kind of respectful attention to diverse perspectives that you hope will be paralleled in subsequent student discussions.

Introduce Periods of Assumption Hunting

One of the most frequently articulated purposes of higher education is to encourage critical thinking by students. A central part of this process involves students identifying and scrutinizing the assumptions that inform their ideas and actions. We can show students what this looks like by first introducing periods of assumption hunting into our lectures. These are times when we stop professing what we believe and spend a few minutes in a "time out" compiling the assumptions on which our beliefs rest, and musing out loud in front of our students on how we might investigate these. When students see us identifying our assumptions and subjecting them to critical scrutiny, it gets them used to the idea that doing this is a regular part of discussion seminars and written assignments.

Assessing Your Lecturing

Probably the best way to improve your lecturing is to see yourself lecture. There are several ways you can do this. One is to use the Critical Incident Questionnaires your students complete to explore what it is you are doing that students find helpful or hindering. A second is to invite a colleague you trust into your classroom to observe you lecturing. You should instruct that colleague as to how she can be most helpful by letting her know the things you would most like feedback on (such as the clarity of your explanations, your

ability to project to the back of the lecture hall, your appropriate use of examples, your pacing, your ability to encourage student questions, your use of eye contact, or your variety of vocal modulation) as well as anything else she feels you should know. Peer observers should be careful to let you know what you did well as well as what needs to be improved.

But probably the most useful approach is to arrange to have yourself videotaped as you deliver a lecture. It is relatively easy to arrange this and, as long as you don't roam too much, need not even involve someone else to operate the camera. Videotaping yourself allows you to become aware of your visual and verbal tics that you may be unaware of but that students find annoying. If videotaping is not feasible, you can make an audiotape of your lecture and listen for ways to improve your pacing, pitch, and delivery. In my experience there is nothing more dramatic or revealing than seeing yourself give a lecture on tape. Sometimes it is embarrassing but it is never less than instructive.

In my own case videotaping made me aware of lifelong habits I have struggled to break: looking at the floor or in middle distance while explaining a particularly difficult point, and answering questions with mini-lectures that are often far too long and meandering. On the other hand videotaping has also underscored my determination to include plenty of practices that seem to play well on tape. These include providing frequent autobiographical examples, programming time for student questions by deliberately allowing silent, reflective interludes, and finishing my lectures by raising questions about, and pointing out omissions in, the comments I have just made.